‘This is ethnic cleansing’ - language wars in Ireland as a context for adult education

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The paper has three parts. Part one sets out a particular context within which issues of globalization, cosmopolitanism and purposeful education can be considered. The context in question is that of struggles to improve the status of the Irish language in the Republic of Ireland, specifically through Irish medium education, and resistance to this. A brief discussion of the implications for purposeful adult education in a globalised and cosmopolitan context is then conducted, articulating this in terms of the concept of ‘dissident citizenship’. The second part outlines a possible analytical framework for considering the nature and possibilities for adult education in the context of social struggles over the Irish language. In particular this framework draws on Stuart Hall’s adaptation of Althusser’s concept of the ‘social formation’. The third part sets out a research agenda for empirically exploring the formation of ‘dissident citizenship’ in the context of social struggles over the Irish language.

The context of political struggle and political learning

‘This is ethnic cleansing’ was a statement uttered by a founding member of a group styling itself the ‘Concerned Parents of Corca Dhuibhne’ in opposition to the Polasaí Lán Gaeilge (Irish Medium Education Policy) adopted by the newly opened community secondary school, Pobalscoil Chorca Dhuibhne¹, in An Daingean (Dingle) in the Republic of Ireland. The occasion for this statement was a public meeting organised by the ‘Concerned Parents’ group to which had been invited representatives of the new school’s board of management. At this meeting those who attempted to speak as Gaeilge (in Irish) were heckled and jeered. It is important to note that the school had barely been open a month at this stage. To understand how it is possible for a citizen of the Irish Republic to characterise Irish language activists as ‘ethnic cleansers’ it is important to trace something of the complex relationship between Gaeilge (Irish language), ethnic and national identity in the formation of the Irish state, and the role of education in the revival of Gaeilge².

The new school was formed from the amalgamation of the two separate girls’ and boy’s schools in the town and the setting up of a co-educational community school in new premises. Understandably, there was great interest in the new school, yet less than a week into the new academic year the school was surrounded in controversy. The ostensible reason for this controversy was the perceived change in the school’s policy on the Irish language. A ‘concerned parents’ group emerged arguing that the board of management of the Pobalscoil had imposed an intolerant Polasai Lán Gaeilge upon students and parents alike. Their demands focused on a return to the situation they said had pertained in the previous two schools of ‘tolerance’ towards the use of English, a situation that they described as bilingual³. The board of management for the Pobalscoil had indeed adopted Polasai Lán Gaeilge, and justified this on a number of grounds. As the only second level institution in the Corca Dhuibhne Gaeltacht⁴ it came under the provisions of the Education Act 1998 that required all Gaeltacht schools to conduct their business and instruction through Irish, although it did allow for the use of English as well.
The board of management argued that they were simply abiding by the legislation, instituting a more consistent language policy (in contrast to the ad hoc arrangements that had arisen previously), and in line with expectations that Gaeltacht schools had a special role to play in the intergenerational transmission of the language. They also argued that Polasaí Lán Gaeilge applied to the new cohorts of pupils; that these pupils would receive additional support; and that existing pupils by and large would receive the same mixture of Gaeilge/Béarla as before. The position of the board of management was supported by an alliance of community-based groups, mostly located in the districts to the west of An Daingean, led by Tuismitheoirí na Gaeltachta (Parents of the Gaeltacht). The battle lines and various political moves rotated around these positions, involving a students’ strike, petitions, legal challenges, and a survey conducted by the Department for Education.

The anger with which some parents responded to this change in policy has to be understood in the context of the historical role education had in the language revival policies of Irish governments following the formation of the Irish state. From before independence, education was identified as a mechanism for reviving Gaeilge as the popular vernacular of Ireland. The colonial education system was a target for the political work of Conradh na Gaeilge, an organisation established expressly to revive Gaeilge. Conradh na Gaeilge focused on getting Irish into the national school system with some success with the introduction of the Bilingual Programme in 1904 which saw ‘an increase in schools offering Irish from 105 in 1899 to 2013 in 1903’ (Ó Croidheáin, 2006). It was with the establishment of the Irish state that saw the education system emerge as the main vehicle for reviving Gaeilge. Commentators differ on the nature and impact of this policy. For instance Kelly (Kelly, 2002) places emphasis on the failure of this strategy to reverse the decline of Gaeilge nationally and within the Gaeltachtaí. Rather than rehearse a discourse of failure, Ó Riagáin (Riagáin, 1997) argues that the (limited) language policy had indeed slowed ‘down a long-established process of language shift’ and ‘clearly altered the spatial and social structure of bilingualism in Ireland’ (viii). That is while the policy did not halt the decline of the main Irish-speaking areas, it did see an increase in people who had a competence in Gaeilge within a mainly English-speaking Ireland. Mac Giolla Chríost (2005) makes the point that looked at from the end of the 19th-Century Gaeilge would cease to exist as a spoken language, and that ‘this has not happened is in itself remarkable’. The role of Irish-medium education and Gaeilge within the school curriculum is closely associated with increasing the numbers of competent bilingual Irish speakers (Riagáin, 1997).

Despite these different interpretations of language policy most commentators agree on a number of key issues. State support for language revival was largely symbolic and that State support declined from the 1950s onwards, with periodic support granted due to grassroots campaigning by language activists and Gaeltachtaí communities. The revival strategy was devolved to the schools. Not only did this produce an uneven development but resulted in a popular conception of Irish being beaten into you’. The place of Gaeilge in education was a focus for politico-cultural struggle from the beginning. The rationale for the strategy was that Gaeilge in the Gaeltachtaí would be sustained through oideachas lán Gaeilge (Irish medium education) while the language would grow through the teaching of the language in the English speaking areas. Resources and incentives were used to drive this strategy. Fine Gael increasingly became the focal point for opposition to ‘compulsory’ Gaeilge in schools, driving a series of campaigns to weaken the language in the education system and State (Kelly, 2002). In this sense the ‘modernisation’ of Ireland became associated with a more privatised view of Gaeilge, something of symbolic, but not material value. In particular, this represented a weakening of a particular nationalist conception of Gaeilge as an inextricable element in Irish ethnic identity forged in the nationalist struggle
for independence. This conception was seen as no longer appropriate in a post-nationalist, modern Ireland increasingly defined by its participation in the European Union. Yet, popular, if passive, support for Gaeilge has remained high, even though its place in education was highly problematic.

While this particular modernisation project was hegemonic, it did not displace other, deep rooted culturalist perspectives on the language. Camille O'Reilly, in the context of language struggles in the 6 counties (Northern Ireland), has developed a useful typology of language policy discourses (O'Reilly, 1997). She outlines three discourses – culturalist, civil rights, and decolonising. In the culturalist discourse language and politics are kept separate. Gaeilge is articulated as an essential element of Irish ethnic identity. The civil rights discourse utilises the language of parity of esteem and minority rights, looking to government to secure these rights. The decolonisation discourse asserts the primacy of politics over culture. While this discourse is much more developed in the context of nationalist and republican struggles in the 6 counties, it is still relevant to my discussion of local language struggles in South West Ireland. This perspective asserts that ‘revival of the Irish language is understood as a project which is central to the post-colonial recovery of Irish national identity’ (Mac Giolla Chríost, 2005), as a struggle against cultural imperialism.

Elements of all three discourses can be detected in the language surrounding struggles over Pobalscoil Corca Dhuibhne. These will be explored in the next section where I seek to further develop O Reilly’s typology in relation to the concepts of ‘articulation’ and ‘social formation’. Both of the groups, those for and those against Polasaí Lán Gaeilge are engaged in a struggle that goes beyond Irish-medium education. They are struggles over local and national identity, struggles over the forms of modernity and post-coloniality. In part, both are forms of ‘dissident citizenship’ in that they are both seeking to rest power from the State beyond the anodine notions of active citizenship articulated by the Irish Government. Cultural struggle can be seen as contexts for political learning.

**Struggle and learning as articulated moments**

This section outlines a framework for analyzing ‘dissident citizenship’. In this section I propose to build on O'Reilly’s typology by looking at discourse within a political economy perspective, in particular utilising Stuart Hall’s adaptation of Althusser’s concept of the social formation. It is proposed that in order to understand how the political and cultural struggles around Polasaí Lán Gaeilge take the specific forms they do, we have to understand the articulations between the domains of economy, culture and politics. In this sense, the localised struggle and ‘dissident citizenship’, as a form of learning, can be understood as ‘articulated ‘moments’.

While O'Reilly’s typology is useful, the analytical separation between different types of language policy discourse needs to be amended. It would be impossible to understand political responses to language policy in the Gaeltacht without reference to a Gaeltacht civil rights movement in the 1960s and its long term impact on the self-understanding of Gaeltacht since. Concern and anger at perceived failure of governments to effectively and seriously strengthen both Gaeilge and the Gaeltacht led to the formation of a Gaeltacht civil rights movement – Cearta Sibhialta na Gaeltachta. A number of outcomes emerged from this political mobilisation. Significant amongst these were the establishment of national Irish language media in the form of Raidió na Gaeltachta and TG4 (television station); and the democratisation of the Gaeltacht development board under Údarás na Gaeltachta that was given responsibility for both economic and linguistic development. I would argue that in the local context it would be difficult to disentangle a culturalist from a
civil rights perspective. Therefore much of the language in support of Polásáí Lán Gaeilge
draws on these two discourses. But opposition also draws on a civil rights discourse.
Some of those opposing the policy argue that with the population of the area becoming
more cosmopolitan, especially as a consequence of mass migration from Eastern Europe,
that Polásáí Lán Gaeilge discriminates against the civil rights of the broader community.
Another discourse is also deployed, that of decolonisation. This discourse is associated
with a movement against the cultural hegemony of English and is witnessed in a flowering
of Irish-language media in print, film and internet. This might be called a language from
below movement. Michael Cronin, in the forward to Caoimhghín Ó Croidheáin’s book
Language from Below: The Irish Language, Ideology and Power in 20th-Century Ireland,
notes, that without this movement from below ‘there would be no Irish-language schools,
no Irish-language radio stations, no Irish-language television, no Irish-language press’
(pp.11). Consequently, despite the recognised limitations of reliance on the education
system to secure intergenerational transmission of Gaeilge, oideachas lán Gaeilge (Irish
Medium Education) was still perceived as a necessary element in the civil rights of the
Gaeltachtaí. Therefore, any move to weaken the status of Gaeilge at the Pobalscoil Corca
Dhuibhne would become a focus for political mobilisation. Also, in the context of national
policy in relation to the Gaeltachtaí, a culturalist discourse has been dominant,
constructing the Gaeltachtaí, despite its decline, as the location of an authentic Irish
identity (contrasted with ‘book Irish’) and the source for future inspiration for the language.
It can be seen, then, that neat divisions between culturalist, civil rights and de-colonising
discourses are difficult to maintain. In order to develop the typology further I want to
introduce Althusser’s concept of the ‘social formation’ (Althusser, 2008), and its further
development in the work of Stuart Hall, and Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe
(Grossberg, 1986; Laclau and Mouffe, 2001, Stack, 1996). Important in this neo-Marxist
theoretical move is the idea of society as determined by the interconnections, or
articulations, between different domains of the social formation. These different domains
of economy, culture and politics are semi-autonomous regions of social practice. Any
social formation is the product of the historically particular articulations between these
areas. That is society is conceived as a ‘complex whole’, it is the nature of the
articulations between these regions of social practice that give any society its particular
characteristics, including any sense of stability and continuity. Such an approach helps us
to understand both the particularity of struggles around Polásai Lán Gaeilge and its
connections to wider structural formations, that it is a product of simultaneous moments of
structure and agency.
The modernisation project outlined above brings together a number of elements and
presents them as necessarily connected. Modern Ireland is constructed as ‘post-
nationalist’ Ireland necessitating a break with the myth of nation that had driven the
nationalist struggle that brought the Irish state into being. Instead, Ireland had to transform
itself into an open European nation. This is played out at the local level with the
deployment of a civil rights discourse that challenges the cultural hegemony of Gaeilge
within the Gaeltacht. Having or not having Gaeilge, using or not using it is articulated as
individual choices, and ones that need to be distanced from State intervention. But this
fails to understand the economic, cultural and political conditions for the decline of both the
Gaeltacht and Gaeilge. The decline of the language within the Gaeltachtai is linked to the
changing economic base that produced the particular social relations that sustained the
cultural hegemony of Gaeilge. One way of looking at this is the changing structure of
farming in post-independence Ireland. The pattern of land ownership following
independence has largely remained in place. Within this pattern the West of Ireland,
including Corca Dhuibhne, were characterised by small family farming, often on
unproductive land. The process of political and economic integration into the European Union further consolidated this pattern of ownership and accelerated the decline in the economic viability of the Gaeltachtáin (Crowley, 2006). The Corca Dhuibhne Gaeltacht witnessed a shift from 90% of male workforce being in farming or fishing in 1926 to just 42% in 1981. By 1981 the service sector in An Daingean comprised 62% of the economy. While the surrounding rural areas declined in population, An Daingean grew, seeing a net increase in non-Irish speakers (Riagáin, 1992; Riagáin, 1997). In contrast, by 1981 45% of women and 1/3 of men aged 10-19 in 1971 had left the western districts around An Daingean. The areas of strongest Irish-speakers were most affected by out-migration. This process has continued.

It is not so much that the population of Corca Dhuibhne has declined (as has An Daingean), but that the social structure and linguistic distribution has been reconfigured. At the same time that the main Irish-speaking populations continue to decline in the absence of an economy that can sustain these communities, so the area attracts people drawn to the quality of life it offers. The new in-migrants include Irish citizens who, having benefited economically from the Celtic Tiger, now seek a better work-life balance. This has impact the Gaeltachtáin in two ways. One is the increase in second homes in the western Irish-speaking districts and in An Daingean town. The other is the rise of settled non-Irish speaking populations. Both have the effect of diluting Gaeilge as the common vernacular. The natural beauty of the area, and indeed the strength of the vernacular culture have attracted many seeking an alternative lifestyle. This is a highly heterogeneous group including Irish citizens who are competent bilingual Irish speakers. More recently, with the expansion of the European Union, the area has become home to a growing population of Poles, Lithuanians, Slovaks, etc. But another group are those who have moved to the Gaeltacht so that they can raise their children as Gaeilge (through Irish). Areas such as Corca Dhuibhne continue to attract those seeking a living Irish-speaking community because, apart from West Belfast, no sustained Irish-speaking community has emerged outside the Gaeltachtáin (Riagáin, 1997). These new Gaeilgeoir’s (Irish-speakers) are overwhelmingly middle class working in the service sector that is increasingly dominating the economic structure of the area.

To grasp the emergence of what I like to call ‘dissident citizens’ we also need to grasp the ‘complex totality’ of the social formation. Struggles over Polasaí Lán Gaeilge are struggles over the changing social relations of Corca Dhuibhne, struggles over a modern Irish identity.

**Researching ‘dissident citizenship’**

How does this inform the development of a research agenda? How does it help research the emergence and particular articulations of dissident citizenship? Struggles around Polasaí Lán Gaeilge are what Althusser would view as ideological struggles, struggles around how we reflect the changing social relations back to ourselves. These struggles involve both the politics of persuasion and the mobilisation of interests. It is possible, then, to outline an approach that can grasp the ‘complex totality’ of localised struggles, of what Laclau and Mouffe would see as the constitution of political subjects. I want to propose three related areas as starting points for such research:

- **Problem definition** - how is the ‘problem’ defined to justify the political response; what kinds of political and cultural narrative are produced and deployed; what are the competing political problems?
- **Solution definition** – how is Polasaí Lán Gaeilge defined as a solution to a political/cultural ‘problem’; how does it fit with other economic, political and cultural
elements; what other possible solutions were considered?

- Argumentation/Persuasion – what arguments are used to persuade people for/against Polasaí Lán Gaeilge; what methods are used to communicate these arguments (media, policy networks, meetings).

I want to argue further that these starting points might be used to explore similar instances of ‘dissident citizenship’ emerging around language struggles on the island of Ireland.

References


Grossberg L (1986) 'History, politics and postmodernism: Stuart Hall and cultural studies', *Journal of Communication Inquiry*, 10, 2, pp.61-77


Notes

1 Corca Dhuibhne is variously known as West Kerry or the Dingle Peninsula.

2 After 90 years of independence still only a minority of the Irish population are competent bilingual speakers of Irish.

3 The use of the term bilingual in these political/cultural struggles has been disputed. It is argued by proponents of Polasaí Lán Gaeilge that in a context of almost total cultural dominance of English bilingualism can only occur where the minority language – Gaeilge, is privileged.

4 The use of the term bilingual in these political/cultural struggles has been disputed. It is argued by proponents of Polasaí Lán Gaeilge that in a context of almost total cultural dominance of English bilingualism can only occur where the minority language – Gaeilge, is privileged.

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